

White Paper Report

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NEH Digital Humanities Start-up Grant White Paper
Grant #HD-51096-10: ScholarPress

With receipt of its NEH Digital Humanities Start-up Grant in Fall 2010, the ScholarPress project (<http://scholarpress.net>) set out to address some common problems faced by the thousands of scholars using the WordPress web content management system to organize their professional web presence and to meet several needs ill-served by existing software. Our modest goal was to tackle a few critical aspects of scholarly activity, including assembling interactive course syllabi, publishing bibliographies with broad publics, and building and disseminating a CV. Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach to the demands for a scholarly web presence, ScholarPress aimed to provide a few tightly-focused tools designed to satisfy these narrowly-defined scholarly needs. Building on the extremely popular and flexible WordPress platform, these tools were intended to integrate closely with a scholar's existing digital identity rather than requiring the scholar to learn, install, and customize a new piece of software. This approach was designed to save the scholar as much time and work as possible. With the support of a Digital Humanities Start-Up Grant, we proposed to build, test, and disseminate prototypes of two of these tools.

We are pleased to report that at grant's end, we have accomplished, and even exceeded, these goals. Despite some significant organizational hurdles and staff changes over the course of the grant, we have produced not two, but three production-ready WordPress plugins for scholarly use under the ScholarPress banner. In addition to the Courseware and Vitaware plugins described in our original proposal, we produced a third plugin called Researcher, which provides functionality similar to the "ScholarPress Cite" plugin anticipated in the future directions section of the grant.

Courseware

ScholarPress Courseware enables the administration of a college-level class through a WordPress blog. Courseware provides the ability to add and edit a schedule, create a bibliography and assignments, and manage general course information. While it was designed primarily for use in higher education courses, it can easily be adapted for other scholarly uses such as workshops, study groups, etc.

As of version 1.1.2, ScholarPress Courseware allows a user to create entries in a schedule in the Schedule page, add items of various media to a bibliography in the Bibliography page, and assign those bibliography items to read (or create other types of assignments) in the Assignments page, and edit course information in the Course Info page. There are several different types of assignments: Reading, Writing, Presentation, Group Work, Research, Discussion, and Creative. Multiple assignments may be added to a particular class meeting date, e.g. two articles could be assigned to read (Reading), as well as a one page synopsis of the reading (Writing), and a question for students to prepare to discuss (Discussion). Each of these assignments shows up separately on the Schedule page for the chosen date. All of these tasks are easily created and edited in separate panels in the administrative interface. The user interface was carefully designed and developed to provide a simple and intuitive process through which the information could be entered. Additionally, an administrative Dashboard provides an overview of the course for review prior to publication.

To date, Courseware has been downloaded nearly 8,000 times, indicating a significant user base. With some further improvements, this number should continue to grow. Ideally, Courseware will eventually be extended to interact with the other ScholarPress plugins described below, Vitaware and Researcher, giving users an option to harness their existing Zotero libraries in assembling course reading lists and assignments. According to the user feedback we have already received, automating the creation of bibliographies using Zotero appears to be one of the most highly desired features for future iterations of Courseware.

Vitaware

The ScholarPress Vitaware plugin makes use of Zotero's native CV builder to allow scholars to publish customized curriculum vitae on their WordPress website. Users of zotero.org can already build a CV from items in their Zotero library and publish it to their profile on the zotero.org website. However, many scholars desire an easy way to embed this dynamically generated CV on their own personal sites or blogs, which often employ WordPress as the underlying software. Vitaware allows users to easily create a CV page on zotero.org and publish that CV on their personal WordPress website.

To accomplish this, Vitaware leverages the shortcode functionality WordPress introduced in version 2.5. Shortcodes are an easy way for users to control where and how plugin information appears on a page, without requiring any coding

knowledge. By adding a simple text string to any page, users can pull in their CV from Zotero. In addition to ease of use, the great advantage of using the Zotero API in this instance is that the user's online CV is dynamically generated. Enter a new publication in your Zotero library, and your online CV is automatically updated with the correctly formatted citation on all instances generated by Vitaware. Using multiple shortcodes for different faculty members, an entire department could use Vitaware to manage the faculty profiles section of its website.

Researcher

ScholarPress Researcher is another plugin that uses the Zotero API, in this case to display portions of a user's Zotero library on a WordPress page. Users can pull their entire library or portions of it into WordPress for display on any page or post. The plugin allows for several customizations, such as citation style and item order, making it useful for different use cases and for scholars of different disciplines.

Researcher offers two methods for users to display Zotero content. The first employs the aforementioned shortcodes functionality of WordPress. A shortcode containing a library or collection ID can be placed anywhere on any page and will bring back the items contained in that library or collection. A second option utilizes the simplicity of custom fields in WordPress. A user simply enters a library or collection ID into a custom field, and places a small function in his or her WordPress theme. This function will recognize the presence of the custom field data, and display the content for that library or collection.

This latter method was tested on, and is currently being used by the Connecticut Humanities Council (CHC) on the new connecticuthistory.org website. For this project, the CHC populated a group library in Zotero with a large number (nearly 2,000) of items. These items were grouped into collections for discrete topics, people, and places, as well as sub-collections for different media types such as audio, video, books, or documents. Simply by entering the collection ID for a specific topic, Researcher automatically pulls in all of the items in the collection organized by media type onto a chosen page. In this way, the bibliographies for several hundred pages are managed centrally in Zotero and update dynamically on the live website. Additionally, because their bibliographical content is managed outside of the website itself, CHC will be able to repurpose this valuable information for other uses and audiences.

Researcher was developed with the idea that users might have different skill sets, and different uses for the plugin, hence the two different approaches (shortcodes and custom fields). Future development plans include allowing options such as citation type and ordering to be set in dropdown menus, making the interface more user-friendly, as well as a simple interface to enter single citations in a footnote style.

Conclusion

ScholarPress represents a relatively modest intervention in the educational and scholarly technology landscape. But it reflects a model that we believe can be extended and built upon. The main objective of ScholarPress was to show that by extending an off-the-shelf, open source, modular technology suite like WordPress, scholars could be afforded greater options with which to manage their digital presence. Specifically, ScholarPress offers scholars the option of using a system with which they are already comfortable to manage key aspects of their scholarly, pedagogical, and public humanities work. ScholarPress is already used by hundreds of scholars. In the coming years, we will aim to increase these numbers and, equally importantly, to strengthen the small, but growing developer community that has started to coalesce around the new software.